



IRENE WILDE

Driftwood Fires

EXTREMES AND MODERATIONS:
EARLY SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA POETRY

A TEXT-TECH PAPERS PROJECT

Extremes and Moderations

Early Southern California Poetry

Extremes and Moderations is a Text-Tech Papers project devoted to recovering poetry written, published, and circulated in Los Angeles and Southern California. Each volume brings neglected books and poems back into view through carefully prepared texts, archival images, biographical context, and a clear record of the surviving sources.

Edited by Brian Kim Stefans

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Driftwood Fires

Irene Wilde

A Critical Reading Edition

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The Text-Tech Papers

Extremes and Moderations: Early Southern California Poetry

Archival Images

A short selection from the source record



The "Flame" divider from Driftwood Fires (1928), cropped from the source scan.

Editorial Note

This is a reset reading edition, not a facsimile. The text was transcribed from the source page images in the local archive and collated against available embedded text. Source-page wraps were rejoined only when the page image showed that they were typographic continuations; stanza breaks, meaningful indentation, epigraphs, subtitles, and section headings were retained. Obvious scanning debris was removed without silently modernizing diction, spelling, or punctuation. Each poem ends with a source note in the established Green-volume form.

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Introduction

Irene Wilde's first book begins beside a dying fire and moves through three states—Flame, Embers, Ashes—as love, memory, Los Angeles streets, desert travel, art, work, grief, and wit change temperature. Its short lyrics sit beside narrative poems about shopkeepers, prospectors, women artists, school, and city life. Wilde had already crossed the country, worked in journalism, married, and served on the jury that acquitted Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle; she would later become a Los Angeles librarian, prizewinning poet, and novelist. This edition resets all thirty-three poems from *Driftwood Fires*, preserves the three-part design and poem subtitles, and uses the original illustrations only in the brief archival opening.

Biography

Maud Irene Haire was born in Wadesboro, North Carolina, to Sidney Johnson Haire and Ann Eliza Birmingham Haire. She graduated in 1905 from the Baptist University for Women, now Meredith College, and published early poems in North Carolina newspapers.

She moved west during the 1910s and married Richard Wilde in San Francisco in 1918, thereafter publishing as Irene Wilde. Records and later accounts connect her with study at the University of Chicago and the University of California at Berkeley; claims of Harvard study require further verification.

Wilde worked as a reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. In 1922 she served on the jury in Roscoe Arbuckle's third manslaughter trial. The jury acquitted him quickly and issued an unusual statement emphasizing that the evidence had not justified the charge.

After Richard Wilde's death, she lived in Los Angeles and worked as a school librarian and teacher. Her poems appeared in *Poetry*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The Saturday Review*, *Script*, *Weird Tales*, and other periodicals.

Driftwood Fires appeared in 1928 from Harr Wagner. The book's dedication to A. P. and its opening note frame it as a record of companionship closed by death. The illustrations are credited to “the Russells.” *Fire Against the Sky* followed in 1938 and the novel *The Red Turban* in 1943.

Wilde won poetry prizes in North Carolina and across the South, including the Savannah Prize, and belonged to the League of Western Writers and the Southern California Women's Press Club. UCLA maintains an Irene Wilde endowment.

She died in Glendale in 1964 and was buried at Forest Lawn. Her papers at UCLA contain manuscripts, drafts, clippings, and correspondence. They are the obvious source for a future edition joining *Driftwood Fires* to the later book and uncollected magazine poems.

Driftwood Fires

Stage 1 | 1928

The complete recoverable poetry text of the 1928 collection, reset from the source page images.

Flame

Name-Making

I saw a butterfly writing something across the sky.
I said, "Butterfly, what is it you write
With such elaborate chirography?"
"Your name," was the reply.
"It is most gratifying," said I,
"To have one's name inscribed so high,"
And fell to thinking...
...When I looked again,
The butterfly had vanished into space,
And of my sky-writ name there was no trace.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 1.

The Gift

I gave him a flower tonight,
And he gave me
A star
Plucked from infinity:
His hand touched mine—
...no breath,
A smart
Like a fang in the heart,
A carousing of blood,
A moment's death!

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 2.

A. P.

Like a flock of brightly colored birds,
His thoughts went racing in high places,
Loitering among trees and flowers—
A wisp of flame darting up dark canyons,
A flash of blue melting along the sky,
Singing, singing, always singing.
He could hear them in the night—
Those sleepless nights!—
But he could never catch them.
All he ever caught was a feather
Which they let fall now and then—
Scarlet or blue.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 3.

Recognition

I dug into the earth,
 And found you there;
I gazed into the pool,
 And saw your face;
In the sap of trees,
 I felt your pulse;
And in the stretch of desert sand
 And widening sea
You were revealed to me:
 We met in silence
For a thousand times
 Before that one eventful night
You came and kissed me
 And took down my hair.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 4.

Explanation

I love him for the merry things and wise,
Which come and go across his face with quiet speech
Like iridescent clouds across the sky,
For old forgotten sunsets in his eyes.

I love him for the cool arboreal shade
He, stalwart, casts for weaker souls to creep into
From heat and press of sun and strife,
For hint upon his lips of prayers unsaid.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 5.

Remembrance

It sounded like an echo, distant far,
Of some dim cavern born—I knew not where,
Or whether it were jest or joy or care;
I only knew a voice stirred the sea,
And sent the wavelets through the pebbles bare.

Out of a haunt forever ages old,
It broke again across the silent scapes
Of land and main, and slow I turned to hear
The curling spray across the distant capes.

Like holy bells that bless at Eastertime,
It spoke, and something in me stirred;
Like fallen stars a glory circled fair
About my brow—I caught a silver word.

I lifted up my hands, my head, my heart:
“I know thee; thou art written in the roll!”
And one shaped from the dusk stood there,
And called a name remembered of my soul.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 6.

If I Could Find

(A Song)

If I could find a yellow bar
Of gold in some dark valley far;
And if it shone like fire in tow
Upon the crested wave of night,
My love for you would be more bright.

If I could find a lordly star
With dartlings red of cinnabar;
And if it struck the sky aflame
At midnight on the desert's rim,
My love for you would make it dim!

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 7.

A Certain Star

He winks at me and I wink at him,
While the others prate of modes and mart;
He understands me and I understand him,
In spite of the fact that we're worlds apart.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 8.

Embers

A Series of Concerts in the Greek Theater

All summer long at twilight,
The little man lifted his bow.
It was pleasant to sit in the open
 air waiting for him;
And then, when he came, so still fell
 the night—
 no light—
Only his slim black evening suit
 against the gray rim
Of the theater roofed with stars
 ...a pause, and then
White nights in Babylon, Egypt's
 seductive thrill,
Rome's pillared glory rising
 hill on hill...

He never spoke in all that summer
 that we heard,
And yet we understood him better
Than each other when we shaped
 a word.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 11.

The Desert

Chanting her dirges of death,
Wrinkled and haggard and old,
She sits through the centuries calm,
Counting her graves and her gold.

What cares she for youth,
This hag with her mandrake spell?
(A spell men cannot shake off nor would,
A thing not evil, a thing not good)
She has forgotten youth,
As all men who seek her forget,
As all men who find her can tell.
What needs she of youth,
This beldam ancient, serene?
Her heart has a secret forever unsaid,
Her heart has a mystery;
Her veins are red.

Chanting her dirges of death,
Wrinkled and haggard and old,
She sits through the centuries calm,
Counting her graves and her gold.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 12.

The Prospector

You who roam the forest and you who ride the sea,
You reck not the call we follow here in the desert wide and free;
Plunging into the night, gutting the earth we go,
Tracking the hunt to its lair, careless of heat and snow.

We pick up the scent of a trail in a hint of dust and see
Things that shine in the dark, brighter than eyes should be;
And blessed by archangel or touched by demon's curse,
We lose the sense of gain or loss, of better or of worse:
We're tracking the hunt to its lair, and, under the desert's spell,
We'll track it straight to the maw of earth or track it straight to hell.

You who roam the forest and you who ride the sea,
Yours is the saner questing, all thinking men agree;
But give me the pick and pan, the fool's hope and the fee
Of naked-throated men, gold-bitten and mad like me.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 13.

The Boom

Fires are lit in shanties
Empty since ninety-three,
And ghost-ridden streets re-echo
To footsteps merrily.

Laughter and joking and swearing,
Clapping upon the back;
Crowds in the dingy station,
Men with pony and pack;

A smell of cooking in air,
And dust from flying wheels;
The braying of burros somewhere,
The whirring of automobiles;

A sound of dancing by night
And of women's voices plain;
An ace and an oath and gold—
The desert is blooming again!

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 14.

Main Street, Los Angeles

Money to loan and diamonds, kits and khaki and coons,
Chaps, sombreros, bandanas, and toreadore pantaloons;
Moccasined Indian and Hindu, Dago and Cholo and Jap,
Milling and mixing and melting as nowhere else on the map.

Politics, intrigue, and passion, hunger, ideals, and sin—
Crimson and white the shuttle that flashes out and in;
Shops in cranny and crevice, quixotic signs that explain
The whimsical half successes that other streets disdain.

Tattooing and fortune-telling, diamonds and money to loan,
Sighing and laughing and cursing and sometimes the hint of a groan;
A smell of grease and onions and exhaust of gasoline,
Of sweat and old clothes and bootleg and rankest nicotine;

Jugglers and quacks and bromides, Semitic tailors and trunks,
Unions, recruiting quarters, pastimes, and flotsam and bunks;
Heartbreaks and thrills and secrets that no man buys or sells,
Cubistic splotches of color and bouquets of immortelles.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 15.

Detour

[To Her—My Friend]

What was between us—a thing like diamond,
As white, as many-colored, and as rare—was marred.
We did not care for mended gems;
Their virtue lies in their perfection;
With flaws escapes the glory, and the gem becomes a gewgaw.

So, after that, you never could come back
From the obscurity of that unnamed desert,
Beyond the reach of rural free deliveries,
To which you went in penance, self-imposed.
The dread alternative, to crucify yourself
Ministering among Molokai's cankering lepers, you thought too kind.
It was your creed that Nemesis, soft-footed,
Creeping daily nearer from behind, will overtake.
You chose rather to outwit her, doing voluntary penance,
Than live from day to day hearing those velvet feet.
Pleasure, you said, had vanished; you chose pain.
The next best antidote for life...

You never could come back—not after that—
And yet, in spite of years that have destroyed our youth,
I feel a pang for you that was predestined;
And sometimes, in the silence of these years,
I press my hands against my eyes to keep back tears;
And I have felt a tugging at my heart only your hands could make,
And left unvisited a certain spot still for your sake...

"Once two souls meet upon the mount
Of understanding," you were wont to say,
"Nothing can make strangers of them again":
We two have stood together there, touching the stars;
And in another life, atonement done, perchance

We two shall stand upon the mount again,
And feel through close-knit hands
The rhythmic beat, caught back from worlds traversed,
By diverse tracks, toward that far end.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 16–17.

Andrea Del Sarto Escapes

I have escaped at last!
I stand upon Fiesole alone,
The wind about me and the stars above.
Through years my feet have walked these hills
To the echo of her feet;
My lips have shaped words only to answer hers;
And all the natural sounds of earth
Were muffled by her voice.
So loyal to her, I have been to all things else disloyal;
The beauty of the dawn, the hills of dusk—
I had forsaken all in my mad love,
Which was a race in which I strove
Till I forgot the spring, the summer;
And beauty passed unseen...
I had forgot till now the rush of gladness
That used to come on lonely nights when walking in the hills,
The pang of pleasure under shooting stars,
The naked pulse of everything I had forgot
From feeling it too long through love's caparison.
I have returned to my first love, the earth;
Her unveiled beauty makes me faint
As strong food after fasting
...Now I can paint!

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 18.

The Complex

Stella Brainard wrote the best essays in school,
When she was twelve and had to leave
Because her mother died.
She's worn a kitchen apron twenty years
And sat upon a dirty kitchen stool.
Every evening at the movies now
You can hear her whispering aloud
The titles on the screen—
Ostensibly to her phlegmatic spouse,
But that's a sham;
It's really to herself
She's saying them—
And there's an exultation in the sound
As though she were uncaging birds
To watch them skyward bound...

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 19.

A Fall from Grace

Sophie Cummings was born in rural parts;
And every year on the first day of May
Her shoes came off and she went barefoot
And climbed trees and jumped streams
And ate green apples and tore her clothes.
Her uncle, who was a city man, saw her
And took a fancy to her eyes, and sent her to a school,
Where she learned algebra and grammar and “the arts.”
She’s been the town’s first lady now,
In the mayor’s mansion on the avenue there,
Three thousand miles from home, for years.
She smiles half smiles and purrs at social functions,
Fingering little cakes with chalk-white gloves;
And is considered just a little—fearsome—don’t you know?
Before the last election, I saw her at a picnic,
Dealing lemonade to children panting-hot, with tousled hair;
And heard her laugh a loud laugh that made her compeers stare.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 20.

Horse Sense

Above the wide-mouthed doorway of Tom Cates's garage,
Two weathered horse heads valiantly project,
Their mouths and flaring nostrils dimly red;
And just between the two, a horseshoe rusted brown.
“What hoax is this?” the humorous traveler calls.
“If you disdain the present, choose the future, not the past;
Take an airplane or a glider for your arms.”
Six years ago, when Tom got tired explaining
That this was once the leading livery of the town,
He took the sign down.
That night a fire burned the back wall
And fifteen fine machines.
Tom put the sign back.
Now when a stranger twits him he explains
That horse sense pays in handling everything.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 21.

Coincidence

Jim Mason who has kept the grocery store for years,
Where children from the school get cookies
For a penny or for naught,
Is in jail for cutting out a man's heart.
The sentence is for life.
The scoundrel, Jim pleaded, dazed at his own act,
Was a dirty beast whom he found inveigling
A little girl who came to buy a lollypop.
"Too bad," folk shake their heads regretfully,
"Jim's an ex-service man and has been straight
Before and since the war—a trifle distant since;
But straight's a string. (He lost his youngest
Brother at the Marne and never quite forgot)" —
"Strange what coincidences life holds," one says apart,
"A boche under shrapnel fire tore out the boy's heart."

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 22.

Rabindranath

He walks serenely in gardens gray;
He tastes red pomegranates from moon-white hands;
He goes into the temple at dusk to pray—
About him clings the mystery of other lands.

His color is like ivory from old tombs;
He loves tuneful words and listens well;
His eyes hold secrets of ancestral wombs
Whose meaning none can tell.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 23.

A Madonna

Within her hillside house alway,
There shines a light.
It shines by day;
It shines by night.

'Tis not a candle nor a lamp
Nor sun nor star
Nor sea-fire damp—
It shines afar.

Its spell is like the flying light
That drew men that first Christmas night;
And we would also gifts of myrrh
And gold incense bring to her.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 24.

Meditation, May Thirtieth

*“ . . . far off voices of the future sing,
‘They shall remain in Memory’s diadem’;
And winds of promise still are whispering,
Through storied years, We shall remember them. ”*

I lay on my back and watched
The green birds fluttering about the sun;
I saw the red dust wheeling down the road,
The woolpacks heaped along the west,
Gorgeous of blood and fire;
I heard reveille at the post of Pierre
And saw the green birds hovering nearer.near.

I felt the bite of cold steel in my navel,
The earth totter like a ship,
Reel from her course, and shudder;
I heard a crashing of elemental things in the dark,
And woke upon an unfamiliar plain
To smell of cannon’s breath and noisy rain.

Up to the planets smote the din of arms,
Mutterings of distant thunder, loud alarms;
Up to the planets smote the din of woe
(How long I have been dead I do not know).

* * * * *

Today I see the petaled hands of children dropping May
And hear, afar, sweet voices turned to pray;
And leaning o’er the parapets of heaven,
I smell the blossomed incense of the spring,
And know my pang an unforgotten thing.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 25–26.

Laurels

The laurels just beyond my garden space
Showed new green with the spring.
I seized my long-neglected pen to catch their grace
(It was, of all I meant to do, the most loved thing);
But someone brought me daisies to weave a chaplet gay.
I laid the pen aside and said "Some other day".
...Another came.
I thought at last to write the good green lay;
But someone came and stood between me and the bay,
And lightly tossed the vibrant pen away.
I said "Another spring". And that came too.
And came the burning in my heart to sing;
But, reaching for my pen, I heard a voice I love
Come whistling "Tea for Two"...
And someone quite as tall as laurels, viewed perspectively,
Came and smiling stood between my lost desire and me.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 27.

Meridian

Gone are all *then's* and *to be's*,
The transcendent *now* is complete;
The heavens are wide and fair,
The earth in beauty is sweet!

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 28.

The Secret

Poppy, poppy, yellow poppy,
Coming out to greet the sun,
There's a secret I must know
For all sleepyheads to copy;
Something really must be done.
Whisper softly now just so,
For about so great a matter
There's no time for silly chatter.
When you do not have a clock,
Or a maid to lightly knock;
When you shut your eyes so tight,
And sleep sound the livelong night,
How do you know when 'tis day
And the time to wake and play?
Do you, maybe, take a peep,
When you're sometimes half asleep?

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 29.

Cosmos

Wind in the willows sighing,
Laughing and dancing and dying,
Low is the voice of your wooing
Here on the twilight lake;
The lilies are folded in slumber,
The bird in the lonely brake...
Now is the hour incorporeal,
Seldom by mortals won:
Infinite I in the Infinite,
Reaching from sun to sun.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 30.

The Soliloquy of Go-Stop the Mighty

I am Go-Stop the Mighty!
I am the twentieth century.
I am the Machine Age.
I lift my voice strident, imperious,
Over all voices.
Caesar, Napoleon, Bismarck—
None of the “iron” masters
Ruled more absolute.
None were better obeyed.
Democrat, autocrat, plutocrat—
They all obey me!
I command;
They understand.
They are my puppets!
I am Go-Stop the Mighty!
I have supplanted man;
I have triumphed;
Because my hands are tireless,
My brain does not sleep,
I make no mistakes.

* * * * *

I am Go-Stop the Mighty!
I am a machine.
Man has tried to make me human—
Shall I make man a machine?

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 31.

Ashes

Permanent

He came when fires were red,
And festal cups full-brimmed
 in bright array
To celebrate an end of travail
 in a waited day.
My other guests were ruddy
 transients,
Gaily sped with welcome and adieu.
They deemed this spectral stranger
 transient too;
But I discovered he had come
 to stay.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 35.

Rebuff

A world that let your radiance go
Held nothing friend to me—
Traces of youth I found a foe,
And health an enemy.

Old Age came muttering “Dust to dust”,
With promise to make amend.
My eyes held all things in distrust,
But saw in her a friend.

An echo of joy came back that day,
The first since you had gone;
I gave my flesh-colored hose away,
And bought a dull black gown.

I sat in corners apart, content,
Withered, and darkly clad;
My last bright coin of life was spent,
And I was old—and glad.

I asked a stranger, by chance, one day,
In a club, for one I knew.
The stranger went, and I heard her say,
“A young woman’s waiting for you.”

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 36.

Illusion

A word
The silken bellcord of Memory stirred;
Her heart a gong, she sped:
“Who calls?”
The Silence said:
“Just
Dust.”

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 37.

Dusk

Low hills in somber shadow hung,
A silence creeping from the west,
A mantling darkness round far flung,
A single star above the crest—
A lonely bird, a lonely cry;
A paltry shard, a silent tear;
A faltering touch, an old low sigh—
The hush of long dark night is here.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 38.

Afterglow

I saw a woman of seraph born,
 A score of years ago;
And she ran with the wind down dim highways,
 And her feet were white as snow.

The woman I saw of spirit mien,
 So many years ago,
Had a crown of fire and a girdle of mist
 And a million dreams, I trow.

I saw her and passed into the street,
 A score of years ago—
The dreamless street with its iron heart
 And its moonless ebb and flow.

I saw her again of late at dusk,
 Who challenged the winds that blow;
And her face was worn like the face of the world,
 And her wingless feet were slow.

“The woman,” I said, “is ashes dead
 And cold as winter’s snow;”
I sighed for the vanished cherubim
 And the dreams that blessed her so.

Then, lo, from the dusk a star leapt forth
 Signaling down the sky;
And I saw in the moment’s whirling light
 The woman arise and fly.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 39.

Vale

O world, I hear you knocking at
my door;
Leave me my driftwood fires,
My ghosts of dead desires—
I cannot rise to greet you
any more.

Publication. First published in *Driftwood Fires*. San Francisco: Harr Wagner Publishing Company, 1928, p. 40.

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Selected primary and secondary sources

Book and periodical titles are italicized throughout.

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Hanley, Terence E. “I Was a Juror on the Fatty Arbuckle Trial!” 2016.

Colophon

Publication and production notes

This critical reading edition was edited by Brian Kim Stefans for The Text-Tech Papers, Los Angeles, in 2026, as part of *Extremes and Moderations: Early Southern California Poetry*. The poems were reset from the source pages identified in the publication notes and datasheet. The book was composed in EB Garamond on a cream field at 6 × 9 inches. The cover uses original abstract artwork prepared for this edition.